

THE IDA PRO HANDBOOK

DISASSEMBLY,
DECOMPILED,
DEBUGGING, AND
REVERSE ENGINEERING
AT SCALE WITH
IDA 9.0+

1010
0101

DISASSEMBLY



DECOMPILED



DEBUGGING



IDAPYTHON



PLUGINS & API



AUTOMATION



COLLABORATION

WORKFLOWS.
AUTOMATION.
MASTERY.

“

The tool doesn't do
the reversing.
The reverse engineer
does.

— Unknown

The screenshot shows the IDA Pro interface with two main views: Assembly and Pseudocode. The Assembly view on the left shows instructions for a function named sub_401000, including push rbp, mov rbp, rsp, sub rsp, 0x20, mov rax, [rbp+arg_0], mov [rbp+var_8], rax, cmp [rbp+var_8], 0, jne short loc_40101B, mov eax, 1, and jmp short loc_401028. The Pseudocode view on the right shows the corresponding high-level code: int __fastcall sub_401000(__int64 a1) { int v1; // eax if (!a1) v1 = 1; else v1 = *(_DWORD *)a1 + 5; return v1; }. At the bottom right, a hex view shows memory addresses and their corresponding hex values.

STEVE T.

The IDA Pro Handbook

Disassembly, Decompilation, Debugging, and Reverse Engineering at Scale with IDA 9.0+

Steve T. Team Publications

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Chapter 1: What Is IDA Pro?

IDA Pro is not just a disassembler. It is the industry-standard platform for binary analysis, combining disassembly, decompilation, debugging, scripting, and extensibility in a single tool. For over thirty years it has been the go-to choice for reverse engineers, malware analysts, vulnerability researchers, and software forensics professionals. The question this book answers is simple: how do you use it effectively at the level the industry demands?

The story begins not with IDA Pro itself but with its predecessor, the Interactive Disassembler (IDA), created by Dan Ciura in the late 1980s. Ciura built IDA to disassemble code from an obscure embedded processor called the NS16032, a chip used in early Macintosh systems. The tool was remarkable for its time: it could parse unknown binary formats, identify functions automatically, and present the results in a structured way that analysts could interact with. It ran on DOS, and it was fast enough to handle binaries that were large by the standards of the era.

What set IDA apart from other tools of the period was not raw capability alone but philosophy. Ciura designed it as an interactive, extensible platform rather than a one-shot analysis tool. Analysts could walk through code, rename functions, annotate strings, and refine the disassembly in real time. The architecture supported plug-ins, which meant the community could extend it without waiting for the core team to ship new features. This design decision would prove prescient. By the time datarescue (the company that commercialized IDA) was acquired by Hex-Rays in 2008, the extensibility model was already proven and deeply embedded.

Hex-Rays, founded by Ilfak Guilfanov in 2005, brought a different kind of innovation to the table: the decompiler. Before Hex-Rays, disassembly produced raw machine instructions that analysts had to mentally reconstruct into program logic. The Hex-Rays Decompiler converted those instructions back into a C-like pseudocode representation, dramatically accelerating the reverse engineering process. When Hex-Rays assumed development and support of IDA Pro in January 2008, the combination of the two technologies was transformative. Disassembly gave you control over the binary at the byte

level. Decompilation gave you a high-level view of what the code was doing. Together, they formed a complete analysis toolkit.

The acquisition triggered rapid evolution. The Hex-Rays decompiler became a core component rather than an add-on, and IDA Pro expanded its processor support to cover dozens of architectures. Over the years, the tool accumulated capabilities that went far beyond disassembly and decompilation: integrated debugging, FLIRT signature matching for function recognition, IDC and later IDAPython scripting for automation, and a plugin API that allowed third-party developers to build custom workflows.

Then came the 9.x release cycle, which fundamentally changed how IDA Pro is distributed and what it supports. In October 2024, Hex-Rays released IDA 9.0, introducing several major shifts:

First, the licensing model moved entirely to subscription-based pricing. Perpetual licenses were discontinued for new customers. The new model introduced tiered plans: IDA Pro Essential, Expert 2, Expert 4, Expert 6, and Ultimate, each with different numbers of decompilers and feature sets. This was not merely a billing change. It reflected the growing complexity of the tool and the cost of maintaining support across dozens of processor architectures, multiple operating systems, and a growing ecosystem of add-ons.

Second, IDA 9.0 introduced headless processing through `idalib`, allowing analysts to run IDA as a library from Python scripts without launching the graphical interface. This was a game-changer for automation. Previously, any script that needed to analyze a binary had to either run inside the IDA process or use the deprecated IDC language. With `idalib`, you could write standalone Python scripts that opened databases, ran analysis pipelines, extracted data, and saved results, all without requiring an interactive session.

Third, the C++ SDK and IDAPython SDK became open-source. The old proprietary development kits were replaced by the `HexRaysSA/ida-sdk` repository on GitHub, where the community could contribute plugins, report bugs, and build on top of the official APIs. This was a significant cultural shift for Hex-Rays, which had historically kept its SDK closed.

Fourth, new processor modules arrived. IDA 9.0 added support for RISC-V (both 32-bit and 64-bit), nanoMIPS, WebAssembly, and T-Head extension instructions used in Xuantie processors. These were not incremental improvements. They represented a deliberate expansion into embedded, IoT, and emerging architecture domains where IDA had previously been weak or absent.

IDA 9.1, released in February 2025, focused on performance and storage. The IDB file format was updated to use zstd compression, reducing database sizes significantly for large binaries. Time travel debugging was introduced, allowing analysts to step backward through execution history when connected to a debugger that supported it. Processor updates improved instruction decoding accuracy across multiple architectures.

IDA 9.2, released in September 2025, brought Golang improvements and new UI widgets. The type parsers inside and outside of IDA were unified onto LLVM's LibTooling, simplifying the codebase and making future type system improvements easier to implement. A new Domain API was introduced for Python-based plugin development, providing a higher-level interface than the raw SDK.

IDA 9.3, released on February 13, 2026, continued the architecture expansion with a V850 (Renesas/NEC850/RH850) decompiler for automotive and industrial processors, a new Andes Andestar V3 NDS32 ISA processor module, enhanced microcode viewer with interactive manipulation capabilities, improved value range optimization, and faster tabular views for databases exceeding 100,000 entries. ARM64 support was significantly extended with SVE, SME, and Memory Tagging Extension (MTE) instruction decoding.

IDA 9.4 Beta, released on June 10, 2026, represents the cutting edge. It overhauls Apple Dyld Shared Cache analysis with dedicated widgets and specialized workflows, adds Swift ABI recognition so the decompiler understands the Swift calling convention, introduces a Pathfinder widget that finds call paths between functions, supports Git-based Teams server for collaborative version control, adds a Qualcomm Hexagon (QDSP6) disassembler for DSP firmware, includes an MCore/CSkyV1 processor module, and provides a native ARM64 Windows build of IDA.

The latest stable release as of this writing is IDA 9.3sp2, a security-focused service pack addressing vulnerabilities in loaders, command-line tools, and the Clang-based type parser. The 9.4 beta is available to enrolled users through the customer portal.

What Is IDA Pro, Exactly?

At its core, IDA Pro is a binary analysis platform that performs three fundamental operations on executable code:

1. **Disassembly:** It reads raw bytes and translates them into assembly language instructions, identifying basic blocks, control flow, and function boundaries.
2. **Decompilation:** The Hex-Rays decompiler takes the disassembled code and converts it into a C-like pseudocode representation, reconstructing variables, types, and control structures.
3. **Debugging:** It attaches to running processes or launches new ones, allowing you to step through code, inspect memory, set breakpoints, and observe execution in real time.

These three operations form the foundation of static and dynamic analysis. Everything else in IDA Pro builds on top of them: scripting automates repetitive tasks, plugins extend functionality, FLIRT signatures recognize known functions, and the database format preserves all your annotations for later review.

The IDA Pro 9.x Architecture

IDA Pro 9.x is built on a modular architecture. The core components include:

- **The Disassembler:** Handles instruction decoding for each supported processor architecture. It identifies basic blocks, control flow edges, and function boundaries from raw bytes.
- **The Decompiler:** Takes the disassembled code, applies microcode transformations, performs control flow analysis, and generates pseudocode. It uses Static Single Assignment (SSA) form internally to track variable values across the function.
- **The Debugger:** Provides local and remote debugging capabilities, supporting Windows PE, Linux ELF, Mach-O, and various embedded formats.
- **The Database (IDB):** Stores all analysis data, including disassembly, decompilation results, annotations, types, and script state. IDA 9.x uses a new IDB format that is not backward compatible with older versions.
- **The SDK:** Provides C++ and Python APIs for plugin development. Both are open-source in 9.x.
- **ida_lib:** Enables headless processing, allowing IDA to be used as a library from standalone Python scripts.

IDA Pro vs. Alternatives

IDA Pro competes with several other binary analysis tools, each with different strengths:

Ghidra is a free, open-source reverse engineering suite developed by the NSA. It offers decompilation, disassembly, and scripting in a single package. Ghidra's decompiler is competitive with Hex-Rays, though some analysts find IDA's output cleaner for complex code. Ghidra lacks the mature debugging integration and plugin ecosystem that IDA has built over decades. Its strength is accessibility: it costs nothing and runs on any platform.

Binary Ninja offers a modern UI, real-time collaboration features, and a powerful Python API. It excels at interactive analysis and team workflows. Binary Ninja's decompiler is solid but not as mature as Hex-Rays for certain architectures. Its strength is the developer experience, particularly for those who prefer a more contemporary interface over IDA's traditional layout.

Radare2 / Rizin is a command-line oriented toolkit that emphasizes scriptability and modularity. It supports a wide range of formats and architectures but requires more manual configuration than IDA. Radare2's strength is in scripting and automation, though its UI is less polished than IDA's.

IDA Pro's competitive advantages are:

1. **Decompiler quality:** The Hex-Rays decompiler consistently produces the cleanest pseudocode across the widest range of architectures and compiler outputs.
2. **Plugin ecosystem:** Decades of third-party plugins provide specialized functionality for every niche of reverse engineering.
3. **Debugging integration:** The tight coupling between disassembly, decompilation, and debugging allows seamless navigation between views.
4. **FLIRT signatures:** The function recognition library is the largest in the industry, with thousands of signatures for common libraries and frameworks.
5. **Industry adoption:** Because so many professionals use it, IDA databases are the de facto standard for sharing analysis results.

IDA's disadvantages are also real:

1. **Cost:** Subscription pricing starts at over \$1,000 per year, which is prohibitive for independent researchers and students.
2. **Learning curve:** The interface is dense, and the API has decades of legacy that can be confusing for newcomers.
3. **Performance:** Large binaries can stress IDA's memory usage, though 9.x improvements have mitigated this somewhat.

What This Book Covers

This book takes you through the full spectrum of IDA Pro 9.x capabilities:

Chapter 2 covers installation and environment setup across Windows, Linux, and macOS, including license activation and troubleshooting. Chapter 3 walks through the interface, teaching you how to navigate the workspace, customize views, and build a productive workflow. Chapter 4 focuses on disassembly fundamentals, showing you how to read machine code fluently and understand instruction encoding.

Chapter 5 is the heart of the book: the Hex-Rays decompiler. You will learn how it works under the hood, how to interpret pseudocode output, and how to fix common decompiler errors. Chapter 6 covers IDA Python, the modern scripting API, with practical examples for automation. Chapter 7 addresses IDC, the legacy scripting language, explaining when you still need it and how to port scripts to Python.

Chapter 8 teaches debugging in IDA Pro, from local process attachment to remote GDB server connections. Chapter 9 covers analysis methodologies, showing you systematic approaches to reverse engineering different types of binaries. Chapter 10 focuses specifically on malware analysis, with real examples of unpacking, API detection, and behavior identification.

Chapter 11 covers binary patching, teaching you how to modify binaries for bug fixes or exploit development. Chapter 12 walks through plugin development in both C++ and Python, with step-by-step examples. Chapter 13 addresses collaborative workflows, covering database sharing, version control, and team coordination.

Chapter 14 covers performance optimization for large binaries, with practical tips for handling memory constraints and slow analysis. Chapter 15

presents real-world case studies that walk through complete reverse engineering projects from start to finish.

The book is written for anyone who works with binaries, whether you are a security researcher, malware analyst, vulnerability researcher, or developer trying to understand compiled code. No prior experience with IDA Pro is required, though familiarity with basic concepts like functions, variables, and control flow will help.

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